TALES OF VRANIA

Tales of Those Forgotten

Part I

FREE PREVIEW / WORK IN PROGRESS

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Before you begin

This is Part I of an unfinished novel set in the future of Vrania, with a new cast of characters. This preview contains nine chapters; it is not a complete novel.

The manuscript is a work in progress and may change. Story pages retain their original layout and numbering.

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PART I

I. DEATH WISH

It couldn’t be true. It had to be a dream. At least that is what she hoped.

The young woman crawled amidst the dirt floor, her frantic movements raising a heavy orange dust that blinded her, adding to the already swollen left eye, pulsating violently with a throbbing pain. Luckily, in an odd way, her once black hair was so soaked with blood that it stuck to her head, reflecting the dark red sunlight – faint as it was – and didn’t hinder her eyesight even more. She kept crawling. Every step, whether it be with a hand or a foot, hurt immensely, sending shots of ache all throughout her limbs, and she knew why that was, but couldn’t do anything about it. She looked down at her hands and, between the swollenness and the dust, she saw the caked mixture of blood and dirt on her fingernail-less digits. She knew her feet were the same, as they pushed forward in tattered old boots. But it had to be a dream. It was going to be alright.

She kept moving. It wasn’t a good idea to stay in one place for too long. The woman knew that, for she had made that mistake before, but not now.

She heard the sounds of roaring fires and the screams that always accompanied them. She heard the thunderous cries of the earth as it moved against itself with anger, grinding away at its own body, careless and uncaring. She heard the howling wind and the lack of

rain. Dust caught in her lungs, and she coughed hard, tensing her abdomen, painfully reminding her of other injuries that she really ought to be paying attention to, were this all nought but a dream. The woman couldn't wait to awake. To stretch in her own bed and breathe with relief, as the memories from the dream dissipated as soon as she tried to reach for them. Though she doubted she would reach for these memories.

She spat on the ground, leaving a slightly dark stain, and kept moving. She didn't look up, there was no use in that. The sky was blackened with the darkest of smokes. And she was half blind anyway.

But she wasn't deaf. And the unmistakable sound of hard boots stomping the ground as someone ran towards her was growing louder. Someone was chasing her.

She didn't remember who it was, for the dream had begun with pain, crawling in the dirt, searching for something that she didn't even know what it was. Was it her name? She didn't remember her name. The woman realized that unexpectedly, and a weight fell upon her.

Who doesn't even know their own name? she wondered with a voice insider her head she didn't know was hers or not. But it had to be. She hoped. Not that it mattered. There was no one around to answer. No one but her pursuer which she couldn't even properly see. She snapped out of her shock, which came perfectly expectedly to one that doesn't know their own name. But she couldn't go far in that state and the shadows were coming closer.

At least it's all a dream. I'll be awake in no time.

A sharp pierce of agony made her look to her hands. The blood was pouring and spreading around the orange dirt, mudding it up in

a dark mixture. She raised her hand closer to her face, to at least attempt to see what had caused the pain, and a glimmer of light let her know she had caught a broken piece of glass, which cut her palm from the middle finger to her wrist. It was deep, and it stung. It wasn't a dream. Dreams couldn't bleed. The woman started sobbing. Dreams didn't hurt that much, they couldn't. She saw the dark red gushing from her hand, mixing in the dirt, and the earth trembled, and the blood jumped and shook, the viscous liquid dancing to the beat of the earthquake. And the dirt swallowed the blood until there was none. She gasped, the woman that didn't even know her own name, and she saw the blood seep out of her open palm and disappear amidst the orange dirt. She looked ahead, called by the roaring sounds of broken earth.

A mountain rose in front of her, jagged, colossal, and old. The earth was raging, tired of battling itself, so it shot towards the sky, its new nemesis. The sky blackened even more, swallowing the little light that allowed her to see. From below the earth rose, and from above the dark sky grew and descended. The woman feared for the moment they would touch. She cried, and in those tears there was relief, for this couldn't be real, none of it. It was a dream, and if one is dreaming, one can only wake up.

"Wake up!" she screamed, her voice – she assumed – cracked and barely there. Such a feeble thing to try and make itself heard above a mountain, such hubris, or despair.

But she was loud enough. And despite the blackened clouds and, the now dark orange dust, her pursuer found her by the sound of her voice.

A hand grasped her shoulder. She felt every finger as they touched her, the threadbare linen shirt acting as if it weren't there.

She felt the hand, and its strength. A calloused hand, a strong hand, a familiar hand or feeling. It pinned her in place. Or she froze. The woman couldn't tell.

"Use it! Conceptualize!" he pursuer shouted, kneeling down to her level.

She startled and tossed her head back, looking straight to the only other person there. *What was that man talking about? Use what?* She had nothing. She was nothing. Not true; she was afraid. A small girl hiding from fists and abominations, from sins and complacency. Hiding from both life and death.

Even with all the dark air and her swollen eye she saw it was a man that stared back at her. A young man. A familiar man.

"You can do it. Use your power!" he repeated, more forceful. "What are you doing?" he shouted above the roar of the earth.

She jerked her shoulder from his grasp and turned, feeling her hands and feet complain from the motion. She crawled back, not losing sight of his face, the little she could see.

But she saw him grin.

"I thought you actually had power. You silly girl." He spat venomously to the ground and began walking towards her. Slowly.

"This is a dream." She murmured, not loud enough for him to hear.

But he did.

"Oh no, not a dream. Not at all."

The woman felt his strong hand grab her hair and yank it back forcefully. She let out a grunt, hoarse and fleeting into dusty air around her. The sound of earth birthing and raging felt beyond her, and all the hurt focused for a moment.

"Do something!" he screamed, ramming her head to the ground. "Use your power!"

She stammered as she hit the ground, now mud from the blood mixed into the dust and ash. *What power?* There was no one as powerless. Her hands were shaking, her mind a complete blank. Who was this man that felt so familiar? But how would she know if she didn't even remember her own name. BANG.

Something impacted her head and threw her around. It hit her in the nose, and blood immediately gushed in rivers, soaking the new, dry spot she had landed. She lost her sight for a few moments, as everything turned white, as if a flash of lightning had filled the sky. Her body immediately curled, and her hands went to her face to protect it. She felt the nose. Her hands pained as she touched anything. The nose was broken and wet, and her face caked in the soot and blood.

"Use it!" The man shouted. She barely heard him above the ringing in her ears. In the background the earth still shattered and moved against itself, but now, with a sound of metal clinking and scraping. "Use your magic!"

She spat blood to the ground. *Magic?* She didn't know any magic. What was happening? Why couldn't she wake up?

Her hands moved on the ground. They shook like grass in the wind. They bled, they ached. She lost control of them, and yet they moved intently. They drew a line on the dirt, and another line crossing the first. She remembered something. Three more lines, and a circl-

A foot stomped her hand, breaking whatever was unbroken. She cried out in pain, tears leaving a clean line on her face, showing their path.

The man grabbed her hair again and pulled the head back. She arched her back, not able to hold herself steady. He approached and she felt his breath next to her face. It smelled of spices and alcohol.

“Where is it?” his voice trembled, as he whispered the words. He was desperate.

She gurgled blood and spat it out. She couldn’t speak. It was a dream.

“Where is it?” he screamed into her ear.

She didn’t know.

He let out a scream of frustration. The earth behind them shattered loudly, the dust spewing from the ground. More flashes of lightning filled the sky, thunderous roars accompanied his scream.

“Just remember you did this to yourself.” He placed his free hand on her lower back and muttered some words beneath his breath. Words she couldn’t understand.

If I die, at least it was just a dream.

He finished speaking. And he pushed.

***

She opened her eyes, all the pain returning at once, overwhelming every sense she had. She remembered her name, and she remembered who she was. She wished she didn’t. She wished she was still dreaming, hoping that when she awoke everything would be alright. That the pain would be gone and that dreams could remain as dreams. *I’m not so lucky,* she thought as she wished for death.

Her scream echoed the old stone walls and filled the midnight air, haunting the dreams of all those that happened to hear it. It wasn’t a dream.

II. THE PRICE WE PAY

She dreamt she was flying and that all was well, but that was just a dream.

***

Rain fell incessantly, wetting the worn-out cobblestones, making them slippery. At least the filth that accumulated during the day was getting cleaned. Most of it, at least. Some would get caught in those proud, lone cobbles, or the larger cracks in the street.

The lone man that walked the streets of Ichinard, on that rainy and dark night, hid beneath the waxed and oiled cloak issued by the Academy. It was old and he had worn it plenty but it was very well made, with a secret Kophysian blend of fabrics that was such a trademark of Academy-issued clothing. Image was paramount to the institution, as the majority of the common folk didn't actually understand what they did, besides the common amenities they provided. Sure, the Academy of the Solace Equinox was known for many things: their teleportation network, connecting major cities in the Kriegan Kingdom; as the biggest network of libraries in the whole of Saiorse; and as a learning institution of the highest order. However, they didn't understand – or wouldn't want to – the weight it had in local and foreign governments; the grip it held on arcane laws; and the actual price people paid for using their resources. The

man, walking the faux-cleaned streets, was part of those that didn't want to know. But he knew. He had just become really good at ignoring it. However, he was getting older, and he cared less and less each day.

Someone shoved him.

He stumbled into a dark alley, holding onto the slick wall for support. He looked to the street and saw the silhouette of two men approaching. They walked hunched towards him and something in their hands reflected the little light there was. He coughed, then inhaled the stench of the rotten fish that had gotten caught on the walls of the alleyway. He looked to the other side, and it was a dead-end.

"We don't want no trouble." Said one of the men. His voice gravelled and was accompanied by a lone hiccup.

"Yeah," the other said. "If you don't scream and you don't fight, you can still get home today."

The man tried to look as non-threatening as he could, and carefully slid his hand onto his inner breast pocket. Before he could reach it, one of the assailants ran to him and pushed him to the ground.

"No funny business, old man."

Old man?

He reached into his pocket again, this time more quickly, and drew a knife that was missing its blade. He spoke a few words under his breath and a blade, no more than five inches, appeared, glowing red and sizzling in the rain. It hummed violently.

The two men stopped for a moment, then one of them stepped up and kicked the fallen man in the hand. He screamed in pain, releasing the knife, and the red glow faded.

“We told you to play nice. But you had to go all knight didn’t you? I’ve heard of men like you,” he said in his guttural voice, no less suited to a cave demon, “always trying to play the hero. But you ain’t no hero.”

“Hey,” said the other man. “what’s that symbol on his cloak?” he pointed to and an insignia above the breast. “Isn’t that the symbol of the Academy?”

“You know what? You are right. We got ourselves a man with deep pockets. And a dumb one to boot. Seems it’s our lucky, lucky night.” He turned the blade in his hand and drew his arm back, clenching his rotten teeth.

The man’s neck twisted. The most repulsive sound echoed the wet walls of the dead-end as his head turned completely backwards, his eyes becoming white almost immediately. His body slumped forward, falling atop the man from the Academy. The other man screamed and ran away, passing by another figure, who stood at the entrance to the alley. The new figure let the assailant pass, his footfalls splashing water around him, and then he raised his hand, pointing a wand, and a quick scream was heard, followed by a body falling harshly onto the wet ground.

The fallen man grunted, pushing the dead assailant away from him. The other man approached and reached out his hand.

“Come one, friend. That is too good of a cloak to sully on this floor.” His voice was nasally and almost too quiet to be heard. The fallen man accepted the hand and rose to his feet. He patted his cloak, cleaning the dirt.

The other man wiped out a metal wand. It appeared to be made out of four thin rods twisted amongst themselves, forming strange knots and patters. He waved the wand towards the cloak, while

muttering a few words. A trail of light exited the tip of the wand and enveloped the cloak, then faded, leaving it perfectly clean, and for a second, dry, as the rain kept falling.

"There, easier that way." He said, putting the wand away. "Are you sure you are part of the Solace?" he asked, certainly referring to the lack of arcane prowess the man had demonstrated.

The other man cleared his throat. "Yes, I'm a Ministerial Messier, in fact." He pointed to the symbol on his cloak, which confirmed he was part of the Academy. The symbols were magically applied and couldn't – to his knowledge – be forged.

"Ah, a *paper mage*. So far from Kriegan?" he asked surprised. The man moved away from the alleyway, towards the main street, letting the light shine on him. He wore a tailored, metallic blue, cloak, similar to the *paper mage's*, but newer, and adorned with more silver straps.

"You are a member of the Academy as well?"

"I am Zenith Rondel. I didn't get your name, *paper mage.*"

"It's Ministerial Messier, though Messier is fine." He answered, a little annoyed. *Paper mage* was a term that those that were either Messier or higher in rank – such as was the case of Zeniths – would call the Ministerials, because they didn't use arcane abilities. Their job was more bureaucratic, but as important as any. And they were still Messiers. "And the name is Callun, Callun Trusk."

"Well, Messier Callun, let's get ourselves out of this darn rain." The two men walked away from the alleyway, but Callun hesitated. "Something wrong, Messier?"

"Are we leaving these bodies here?" he asked, concerned. The second assailant lay just outside the alleyway, his blood being washed away with the rain.

“They tried to rob you. A member of the Academy. They deserved worst. By the way, I am curious, what was that you drew to scare them away? Never seen anything like it.” He kept walking.

The Messier gave the assailants a final glanced, then searched for his glowing knife. He found it behind a heap of trash. Callun walked towards the Rondel and showed him the blade-less hilt, as they walked. The Zenith was much more physically imposing than Callun, and much younger as well. And there was something in his eyes. Something hidden behind the falling rain. “It’s just a scorcher. Standard carry from a Ministerial Messier.” He murmured a few words and light spewed from the hilt, forming a blade made out of sputtering plasma, emitting a bright red hue. “It gives a small burn, but since most common bandits have never seen it, they are afraid and run away. It’s not for actual use.” He turned off the plasma and put it away.

The Zenith raised his eyebrows. “So, you do know some magic.”

Callun shrugged. “Enough to get by.”

“You are not a young man, Messier. I would say you’ve gotten by pretty well.”

The old man smiled sheepishly to himself. “We study the principles of arcane law when we are Gibbous, just the same as anyone, so technically, I *know* magic.”

They walked silently for a moment, only passing by a few folks that dared walk outside, on that early autumn Iavas night. There was a storm at sea, so no ships would set sail that night, and likely not in the following day. A bigger storm was coming soon. Ichinard was a fishing town, and, by the gods, that much was clear.

“You didn’t say why was a Ministerial Messier so far from Kriegan. I thought all bureaucratic work was made in the Academy’s headquarters.” Rondel asked, not looking at Callun.

“Oh, I am a recruiter. The Mayor of Ichinard asked for a visit, so I come and interview potential candidates for Vernals and Virgos.”

“I always asked myself how those new students came by.”

“You weren’t recruited?”

Rondel chuckled. “No, no. I had a birthright.” He said as if it was obvious.

Callun nodded. He knew exactly what that meant. While some had to apply and pass tests to enter the Academy, others had only to be born with the right name. He wouldn’t say what he thought of the practice aloud, of course. Rondel’s parents could possibly outrank even a Zenith of the Solstice Council, and that meant only trouble for ol’ Callun.

They made their way to the centre of the city proper in silence.. Callun struggled for something to say, to try and fill in the awkward silence. Rondel didn’t seem to care.

Finally, the Messier cleared his throat.

“And what is a Zenith doing in Ichinard, if it is not an indiscretion to ask?” he said shyly. Though Callun was an experienced member of the Academy, most of his life was spent either travelling or in offices with Gibbous and Vernals, both of lower ranks. He wasn’t accustomed to speaking with full Zeniths and wasn’t sure of what he could actually say. One wouldn’t want to get in trouble at the end of one’s career. Fortunately, Rondel snorted a smile.

“By anyone other than a Ministerial Messier, it would be indiscretion to ask.” He said, keeping his eyes forward, half-

squinted. “Recruiting.” He said with a mischievous smile. He stopped walking.

Callun stopped as well and looked around them. They were at the entrance to a busy inn. The sign atop, swinging from two rusty – but well oiled – chains read ‘Siren’s Lament’. Both men stared at the sign.

“It is time I leave you. You do have stay in town, right?” said Rondel.

Callun nodded. “Yes, yes. Not too far from here, actually.”

“Good. I would hate to leave a colleague stranded. I have business to attend to. Stay out of trouble Messier Callun. Go inside, have a drink. You’ve earned it this night.”

“Of course, yes. I just might. Something to warm these old bones.” Rondel began walking away, the rain obscuring his fleeting figure. “Thank you for saving my life!” shouted Callun, but he wasn’t sure he was heard.

He sighed, hoping he had done nothing to offend a ranking member of the Academy. No good could come of that. He looked around, feeling the cold breeze strike his unprotected neck. He decided to accept the suggestion of a drink and went inside.

The door was a magnificent object for insulating sound, it seemed, as when he opened it, all the noises from a full pub came rushing towards him, overwhelming him for a second. He went inside and it was warm and smelled like a proper tavern should. The air was heavy with alcohol, sweat and human warmth. He found a quiet place by the bar and ordered a tankard of warm, spiced wine. Something that would warm him right to the bones. He grabbed his tankard and took a sip. It was flavourful, and the barkeep must have seen the symbol on his cloak, as the drink contained a fair amount

of wine and wasn't merely wine-stained water. There were good things about working for the Solace Equinox.

He turned in his seat to gaze upon the crowd. The tavern culture in Ichinard was clearly thriving, though in a rainy night such as tonight, that wasn't a hard ask. He took another sip and felt the drink descend to his stomach and warm him. Perhaps Ichinard wasn't as shit as he thought it was. Though, after so many years of soul-crushing work, the issue weren't the cities.

Someone bumped into Callun. His tankard spilled hot liquid all over his cloak. There was a mess of people and shouts, as folks got out of the way of falling liquids.

"Hey!" he exclaimed.

A small man, with a large, swollen belly, attempted to stay straight as he stared Callun in the eyes – as best he could, as his eyes wandered the room. Though his belly was large, the man wasn't overweight. He was best described as puffy. The cheeks were rosed, the eyes were almost shut, and he had an air of sluggishness that spread to every single one of his movements. One would normally assume these to be the temporary effects of overconsumption of alcohol, but Callun had a feeling this was, if not completely, almost permanent.

"Hey yourself, fucktard!" the man shouted. Callun was assaulted by the smell of the cheapest of liquor coming from the man's mouth and looked around searching for open flames. "Watch where you're going! Who do you think you are? You're not from around here, I know it!" he screamed to Callun, his words slurring and stammering.

"Neither are you, Wurf!" someone shouted from the back.

"Go fuck yourself, whore son! I am more of an Ichinardian than your mother ever was!"

“Alright, Wurf, time to go.” The barkeep came from behind the bar and started pushing the drunkard out of the establishment. He returned with a rag and handed it to Callun.

“My apologies, Arcanist. Just a local drunk, you must understand. The drink is on the house, yes?” He smiled, disarming Callun, who didn’t even correct the man. He wasn’t an Arcanist. That was another name for a Zenith. Though common folk tended to call every member of the Solace Equinox an Arcanist, nothing could be farther from the truth.

Callun dried himself with the rag and finished his drink, while the barkeep made sure he was alright, by repeatedly offering him more drinks, which Callun politely refused. As he had the good mind to not drink too much, he returned to his inn safe and sound just in time for a good rest. Recruitment day would be gruelling, and he very much needed to sleep.

***

Callun woke up with a monumental headache. He dragged himself out of bed, barely making it. He stood straight – while hunched to the point of almost touching his toes – and carefully walked to a nearby chair. He sat down for a moment. He deserved the rest. Perhaps he hadn’t refused as many drinks as he thought.

After getting dressed he managed to walk downstairs to the ground floor, where he could get some breakfast. As he finished his meal – some hardy oats with honey – he felt better. He walked to the barkeep to pay his tab and took out his pouch. It felt lighter than it should.

“By the gods.” He murmured as he rummaged the pouch.

The barkeep raised a suspicious eyebrow. “Is everything alright, arcanist?” he started signalling the imposing bouncer that waited in the corner.

“I could have sworn I had more coins in this pouch…” he stuttered. Callun saw the bouncer approach. “Oh, gods, no. Your services are not necessary.” He chuckled nervously and put his hand in a secret pocket concealed inside the cloak. Good thing he prepared for situations like these. He was used to it, as he had to visit all sorts of places for work. He drew another, smaller, pouch. “Here you go, all his well. Thank you.” He paid and quickly left the inn, thinking that even if the admission interviews took more than a day, he would never set foot at that inn again, for the sheer shame of it.

Now, who had stolen his coin? He still had it when he met Zenith Rondel, as he made sure to check, even if the attempted robbery had gone sour. He had it when he paid for his drinks at the ‘Siren’s Lament’…wait. He hadn’t paid anything in that tavern. The drinks had been free after…

“That darn drunk!” he said in the middle of the street. Several people turned to him, feeling called out, some taking offense. He pulled his cloak tighter and left, before his possessions would lessen. It wasn’t the amount of money he was worried about. He had gold and could get more at any Solace Equinox building. It was the feeling of helplessness that had happened two times in less than half an hour.

But he had no time to worry about that. Perhaps after the admissions. Right now, it was time to head to the Academy and set up his office for the day. There was work to do.

***

There were great things about working for the Academy of the Solace Equinox. Ministerial Messier Callun Trusk sauntered inside the building of the Academy, feeling important. He was important. Today, he was the man who would decide the next members of the Solace Equinox. He could be responsible for enlisting the Wizard that finally tamed the Quartz Dragons; the Mage that defeated the Azharis and took back the rest of Saiorse; the Arcanist that puppeteered the Kroll of Bence, at last uniting all of the continent of Arish; the Virgo that found and catalogued the missing signatures of the Hallow Grounds Treatum; or the Vernal that mastered the arts of hospitality so well that even a higher devil would feel welcome inside a library full of prayers to the Sunsire – and, by the gods, one could fill many libraries with those.

His steps upon the marble floor were light, almost tip-tappy with excitement. His headache from the previous nights' revelry was soon but forgotten – no less thanks to some medicinal potions he carried – and the matter of stolen funds was… well, not forgotten, but the anger had been numbed. He strolled towards the counter, behind which two young Vernals – blond, of course – welcomed him. They couldn't be older than twenty-five and were probably close to graduating to Virgos.

"Greetings, master wizard," said the one on the left, seeing his Academy insignia, "how may we help you today?"

"Be greeted, Vernal. I am Messier Callun. I believe I am expected." He said with a wide smile. Callun looked around. As with every library of the Academy, there were two doors behind the counter. The door on the left, which was closed, would lead to the quarters of the members, as well as laboratories and other sort of office spaces. The door on the right – open – lead to the library

proper, where rows of cabinets held tomes older than Callun himself. Likely older than even the Academy of the Solace Equinox. Through the door he saw a man, a thick blue robe tight to the body. That would be a Virgo of the Solace Equinox. The librarians, which was the entry position for any male members. It brought him fond memories of his days there, though he had studied in the Kriegan library. He looked back to the Vernal.

"Of course, Messier." She gave a slight bow. 'Cella', her name, was embroidered below the Academy's insignia, on her cloak. "Vernal Xandra will accompany you to the audience chambers. We already have a few expectant applicants." She smiled at him. It was a good day for Vernals as well, of course. They would outrank the accepted female applicants and could bestow them the more menial tasks of the job.

Messier Callun looked at the other Vernal, Xandra. Now that he was watching closely, he noticed she was younger the Cella, and her blonde hair was dyed. Not that there was anything wrong with that. He smiled kindly to her.

"Admission day is always so wonderful, Vernals. The potential is overwhelming". He sighed with glee. "On our way, then."

Vernal Xandra walked out from behind the counter and led him through the door on the left.

They walked the cold hallways to the audience chamber and turned just before the main door. There were already a few dozen people there, waiting to be called. The Messier and the Vernal entered through a side door to the audience room. It had a pulpit with a large enough area that Callun could stretch all his writing and evaluation supplies. Facing the pulpit, several rows of long benches, split into four columns, occupied the space of the chamber. There

were a few tall windows, but no decorations. The room was bare, which was on purpose. The admission process could be gruelling, and the Academy wanted to make sure the applicants had no distractions.

"Messier Callun." He heard the Vernal call. He smiled to her, acknowledging he was listening.

"Someone left a letter for you, earlier this morning." She handed him a folded piece of parchment, neatly presented with a wax seal and a silk ribbon. He didn't recognize the insignia.

"Thank you, Vernal Xandra. By the way, I was the unfortunate victim of thievery yesterday and I was left without much gold. I will be withdrawing some from my account at the end of day."

She nodded and bowed before leaving the room. Messier Callun tidied his clothes, making sure everything was proper. He took a deep breath and smiled. The start of the admission process always made him happy. Such excitement. Such potential. He relished in the moment. "Trusk," he said to himself, "this will be one of the last times you do this. Let's enjoy this, let's have a good day. Let's find the next great wizard!" He trembled with nervous anticipation.

Callun cleared his throat to call the applicants, then started as he remembered the letter.

"Oh, right." He glanced at the seal, a stemmed rose. He opened it and as he did a thin piece of paper dropped. He immediately recognized it as a note of credit to any bank in the Kriegan Kingdom. He frowned and read the letter that accompanied the note.

After finishing the letter, the joy was all gone. No more nervous excitement, only dread at the day ahead. This wasn't anything new, and he had read similar letters all his life. He knew he would likely not find talent today. He drank some water and cleared his throat,

hating the Academy of the Solace Equinox with every bone he had. He called in the first applicant.

III. BETTER LATE

There was one thing Elliot wasn't. Well, there were many. She was, after all, a young woman with interests and a personality. But one consistent thing she wasn't, was late.

She sat at the table in her home, feeling the warm fire behind her. It was a cold day and she felt thankful for those flames that danced on her back. Her mother walked nervously around the room, preparing the breakfast oats with honey. She didn't even look Elliot in the eyes and didn't speak a word as she put the bowl with food on the table, a little too forcefully. Elliot cowered a little at the sound and began eating in silence.

After a few moments of her mother pacing, she grew the courage to ask. "Today are the tests. For the Academy." She added seeing the confused stare on her mother's face. She was a thin woman with sunken eyes, and she rarely smiled.

"And?" she asked, glancing at the corridor that led to the master room of the house. Elliot knew what she was waiting for.

"Hmm… there is a fee."

"How much?" she asked, turning to Elliot. As she noticed her daughter watching her, she turned and returned to her cooking and pacing.

"Two silver."

Elliot glanced to the corridor as she heard steps. Her father entered the room. He was a small, oily man, with a thick paunch. He waddled as he headed for the table.

“You heard that? Your daughter needs two silver for the exam.” Her mother said aggressively.

“What exam?” he asked with the hoarse voice of someone who was still waking up.

Her mother raised a wooden spoon.

“Doesn’t matter what exam. Don’t you have two silver? Give it to her.” She shouted.

Elliot lowered her head and ate quickly.

“Fine, fine.” Said her father, rubbing his head. He drew a pouch from his pocket and took out two silver coins. He slid them towards Elliot, who didn’t look him in his eyes.

“Thank you.” She whispered. He didn’t look at her either.

“What is that?” asked her mother, pointing the wooden spoon at his hand.

“What do you mean, what is that?” he asked, starting to raise his voice.

Elliot began eating faster.

“That pouch is not yours, Wurf. Where did you get that?”

“Mind your own business, woman. I’ve always had this pouch.” He answered back.

Elliot finished her food, rose from her seat, washed her bowl and left before her mother could even ask her father one more time about the pouch.

She shut the door of her house, taking a deep breath of the outside air. A soft breeze rolled in the streets, coming from the oceanside, but at least there wasn’t rain right now. The sun hit her tan-less skin,

not providing enough warmth to supress a shiver. She pulled her dark grey shawl tighter around her neck to keep away the cold, and walked away from the house, where she could still hear her parents screaming at each other. Her mother preferred the mornings to shout. Luckily, they were too busy to notice her leaving. That was a good thing because she had better things to do.

She hastened her pace, hoping it would warm her up, but felt some pain with the longer strides so she eased a little. She would get warm eventually. A yawn threatened to form but she supressed it. She hadn't slept much last night. But today would be a good day, she could feel it. And she was excited for what was to come. As Elliot walked between the tight street, the tall buildings on each side hiding the soft sunlight, a lone hand waved from high above. She glanced up and a familiar head peeked from the window. A young man with tussled brown hair smiled softly at her. She thought she saw his smile show a hint of concern, but she shook off that feeling. It was probably all in her head. She tucked a strand of straight black hair behind her ear and looked to the boy, softly waving back.

"Spying on me, Argen?" she smiled back at him.

He grinned. "You wished, Elliot. There was a tiny skrill on the cobbles."

"You are three stories high. How could you see a tiny skrill?" She chuckled.

"It must have been huge then. It flew away just before you arrived."

"Ah, I see. I'll keep my eyes out for the giant skrill in Ichinard. Perhaps I'll hear about it from the market crier."

"Perhaps." He smiled ear to ear. "Excited for today?"

How does he know? She thought. She knew he wasn't attending, he had no interest in such things. Argen was the son of a cobbler, who was the son of a cobbler, whose father had been a cobbler, and that probably went back as far as when shoes were invented. He was already a cobbler, and would also father one, of that there was no doubt to Elliot.

She smiled to him and snuggled her shawl.

"Good luck."

"See you tomorrow, Argen, see-er of giant skrill."

He laughed softly, showing again the concerned look, hidden behind his eyes. No, it was just in her head. He was a nice man.

She walked a bit forward, and another head popped out of a building, this time at head height. It was an older woman, a scarf wrapped around her head.

"Hey, you." She called brusquely towards Elliot.

She looked towards the old woman without slowing down.

"Tell your father I want my gold back. Or else."

"Tell him yourself, you shrivelled old rat!" A voice shouted from the back.

Elliot glanced looked up. Argen waved his fist at the old woman from his window.

"Mind your business, cobbler!"

"You sound like your shoes are too tight!" he shouted back.

Elliot giggled and kept walking, trying to ignore the woman. She should have been used to it by now. Not a week went by without such an encounter. But she wasn't. Some things one never gets used to. Numbed to it, perhaps.

She quickly got to the open market area of Ichinard, – their home being close to her father's business – and sought out her friend.

There weren't many folks walking around as it was too late for the fishermen selling their fresh catch, and it was too early for the general market dwellers. She was quick to spot her friend, as she waited in the place Elliot expected her to be: under the banner of her parents' flower shop, 'Thornless Thornes'. A pun with their family name, Thorne. Some folks lived up exactly to the expectations of their name, and the Thornes were the paradigm, owning the biggest flower and decoration business in Ichinard.

While her friend, Laed, was waiting for Elliot, she was not late. The ninth of the Sunsire hadn't rung, which was when they had agreed to meet.

Elliot waved to Laed, who waited patiently, rubbing her hands. She was the same age as Elliot, slightly bigger of frame, with rosy cheeks that suited her nearly blonde hair. She always looked life she fit everywhere, and though they had grown together, there was always something too different about them that kept them from becoming more intimate. Laed saw Elliot and rushed to her, meeting her halfway. She wore a thick wool cloak of dark blue, trimmed in gold. Elliot awkwardly fixed her worn shawl. That was another difference between the two girls. While Elliot's father also had a sort of successful business, selling spices locally, the Thornes had always seemed wealthier. Laed wasn't the kind of girl to mention that sort of things, and she never made Elliot feel bad for it, but it was one of the things that was always there. The other was perhaps that Laed hid nothing behind her smile.

The large bell rung nine times.

"Oh, by the Sunsire, it's today, Elliot! Are you excited?"

"Excited? I haven't stopped studying since… since Ethuil. Summer just completely passed me by."

Laed grabbed Elliot's arm and they walked the market plaza. "I know, I missed you these last few months. You were barely around. I don't even understand why you are studying so hard."

"I want to be prepared. I doubt the admission process will be easy. They wouldn't let anyone go to the Academy. Only the best." Said Elliot. She still couldn't believe she was trying for a chance to become a Vernal of the Solace Equinox. She had been waiting this moment all her life, and now that she was fourteen, and a Messier had come to Ichinard, she could finally go through the admission's test. As soon as the notice went out that the tests would be happening, she hadn't stopped studying. Luckily, libraries of the Solace Equinox were available to anyone. Most of the texts, at least. Elliot spend so much time there that she saw the Virgo go into back rooms, and she was certain they kept the rarer tomes there. A wise decision, of course. But soon she would have access to all of those and more. Too many books to read in one lifetime. And *magic*! She would learn magic, become a great Arcanist and just go, see the world, beyond the mountains, beyond the ocean! She couldn't even imagine such worlds. Such possibilities, that perhaps were too far, she shouldn't think so big. One step at a time, one day at a time. Today was admission day. Laed's voice brought her back to real life.

"Oh, why bother studying. You are either special or you're not. Grandma said not to worry. That I come from a line of Arcanists and that 'the only reason your mother didn't become an Arcanist was because she preferred to pick flowers in some darn field'" she said, imitating the accent of an older, noble woman.

Elliot scoffed. "You really didn't study at all?" She couldn't imagine that.

“I glanced some of Grandma’s tomes when I visited in Kriegan, but she said I had time to study when I become a Vernal.”

The two girls passed the town crier, as he brought news from neighbouring cities, gave updates on the weather that came straight from the Academy, and shouted whatever new decrees had been published.

“Any news of the giant skrill?” Elliot shouted at him.

He frowned, giving her an angry look for interrupting him. “A giant skrill, miss? Where did you hear that nonsense?”

“From the third floor.” She laughed, letting some of her nervousness out and hastened her pace for a moment, slowing down as she felt a prick of pain.

The crier scoffed and continued his ramblings.

“A giant skrill?” Laed asked, laughing.

“Don’t mind it, just something Argen said.” She said, feeling silly. Perhaps she should have stayed quiet.

Laed raised her brows. “Oh, the cobbler. His he coming to admissions too?” She said in an obvious mocking tone.

“No, he has no interest in magic.”

“He likely doesn’t even know how to read.”

“Laed! He is a nice man, leave him be.”

Laed rolled her eyes and pulled her hair from the back to cover her neck.

“Laed, is your hair… blonder?”

“I thought you never noticed. Yes! I bleached it two days ago.”

“Bleached it? Isn’t that very expensive?” Elliot asked in hushed tones.

"Oh, a little. It looks good, right?" She puffed up her hair, full of dancing curls and – now that Elliot noticed – more volume and sheen than normal.

"It does, but why?" Elliot started nervously fiddling with her very black hair, which laid flat and straight.

"Oh, I asked papa. You know how the Vernals are always so well put together, and their hairs are always so light and neat. That's why I got this cloak too. Blue, same as theirs. It shows confidence."

Confidence, right.

Laed must have noticed the awkward silence that followed, so she quickly went on a rant about some kind of flower Elliot had never heard about. Together, the two girls walked to the Academy of the Solace Equinox, where they were led to a waiting chamber alongside other hopeful candidates.

Elliot sat carefully, then looked around the room, feeling the eagerness inside her chest. Most of the applicants were around their age, but Elliot didn't know them. The admission tests were only administered in larger cities, so people came from the neighbouring towns and villages, sometimes even farther away, to try. There wasn't a limit to the number of applicants that were approved to learn in the Academy, so there could be up to a hundred people for an admission day. There were thirty-eight in the room. They kept to themselves, quiet and nervous, most of them fiddling with something. Laed made quick work and in less than five minutes she was talking to the room. Most of them smiled awkwardly and answered her back, but they obviously wanted to be left alone to ruminate in their anxiety. Or at least that's how Elliot felt.

She began recalling some of what she had studied in the last few months. It was hard, Laed wouldn't shut up and Elliot's thoughts

kept losing themselves. What if she didn't pass the test? Her parents had been angry at her for spending so much time locked in her room studying, and if she didn't pass it would have been for nothing. More than that, she had spent two whole silver to take the test. It was a lot of coin; not 'bleach the already blonde hair for fun' coin, but still a lot.

Someone cleared their throat next to Elliot. She looked up from her chair and saw one of the beautiful Vernals from the entrance lobby. Her hair was so blonde it was close to white, and she was very well put together. A perfect woman scholar. Laed was right, of course. Elliot pulled her shawl tighter, feeling evermore just a girl. She had seen the Vernals as she went to the library plenty of times, but so up close their presence was startling. To think that she would be one of them… *No, Elliot. One step at the time. Don't get your hopes up. You will probably fail the test anyway*. The Vernal smiled at her and handed her a piece of paper. She went around the room and handed one to all of the applicants.

"Welcome to the Academy of the Solace Equinox. I am Vernal Cella. We hope this is the first time of many that we see you here. I have just handed you the application form. It is standard information such as your name, your parents' name, address, medical history. If any of you have difficulty reading and/or writing please let me know and I will assist you, alright?"

Elliot took out her pen and began filling the form. She noticed one of the young men, a rather well dressed individual, called Vernal Cella to help with reading and filling the form. Elliot tried not to look directly at him. How could one not know how to read and write and apply to the Academy, the highest institution of learning in the whole world? Every son of merchant, every urchin knew how to

read if they wanted. Kriegan had a very strong framework to combat illiteracy, such that it was a luxury to not know. Judging by the boy's clothes, he was used to luxury. Elliot felt bad for him. They weren't fighting for limited spots, so he would just fail the test. She scoffed to herself. *Like I'm so certain I'll pass*.

Elliot glanced to Laed's form.

"You have your mother's family name?"

"Hmm?"

"Thorne. I thought it came from your father."

"Oh, that would make sense, because he founded the flower business and all, but no. Grandma Thorne would not 'have her daughter change her name to some country man's family name'". Laed shrug. "Honestly, Thorne is much better than Cams anyway."

Elliot nodded, feeling slightly disappointed. It was much more enjoyable when the name and the occupation matched organically. This just felt… lacklustre. But who was she to talk. Her family name was Xem. What occupation could she have with that name? A Xemist? That wasn't even a word. She finished filling her form in silence.

After a while, they heard people inside the audience room. The nervousness grew inside the waiting chambers, as they expectedly waited for their name to be called. The test, and the entire admission process, were well-kept secrets. No one that hadn't taken part in the process really knew what happened inside that room. In only a few minutes, a few hours at most, Elliot would know. She felt the weight of the moment tense her shoulders. This could be how she escaped. The tension pulled her muscles and made her ache slightly and she forced herself to relax. She was trapped. The ocean on one side, nothing in the horizon keeping her there, but a never-ending expanse

that cut off her sights. The mountains on the other side, so colossal a barrier than even the thought of what was beyond brought her to her knees, the feeling of desolation swallowing her. The Academy was the key to her liberation. So much depended on that moment. Lost in her contemplations, she didn't notice the time go by.

"Elliot."

She snapped out of her thoughts and came back to reality. The room was already halfway empty. The illiterate boy wasn't there anymore. *Did he pass?* She looked to the side. Laed was grabbing her arm, calling her.

"You really were someplace else, huh? They are calling my name, I have to go. See you later. Good luck." She smiled at Elliot. She only looked slightly nervous. How could she do it? Now that Elliot was aware of where she was again, she was practically shaking. And she had wasted that waiting time. She hadn't revised anything.

More than half an hour passed, and another person was called. Laed hadn't left the room, which meant that there was another exit. Elliot wondered whether her friend passed or not. A not so small part of her wished she didn't, as she hadn't studied at all. But perhaps she didn't need to study as much as Elliot. Perhaps she was *special*, like her Grandmother said. *What does that even mean?*

***

"Elliot Xem." Someone called from inside the room.

She froze for a second. Had they called her name? Perhaps it was just her imagination. But nobody else was moving. No one was looking at her either. Why would they? Nobody knew who she was.

“Elliot Xem.” They called again. This time she got up, straightened her clothes, doing her best to look more presentable than she felt, and went into the room.

The door shut behind her. It was a smaller room than she had anticipated, and an older man, balding and only slightly overweight greeted her with a tired smile from above, and behind, a podium. He too, looked very presentable. That only added to her nerves. She became evermore self- aware of her worn clothes, and her oily black hair that probably looked like two curtains of shoe polish were framing her face.

“Your form, please.” Said the man. “And you may sit.” He was nice to her. *Because he feels pity, just from looking at me. Why didn’t I find new clothes?* She thought. *No, one step at a time, Elliot. Focus*. “Welcome, Elliot.” He said, recalling her name from the form. He kept reading the information as he said the same speech he had said at least almost twenty times just that day. “I am Messier Callun Trusk. You may address me as Messier. I will be asking you some que-” He stopped abruptly, glancing at the form.

Oh no, why did he stop? What did I do wrong? Did I forget how to write? Did I spell something so terribly wrong that I won’t even be allowed to take the test? “Messier?” she asked, her voice barely coming out.

He looked at her, back at the form, then back at her. Whatever had stopped him, he shook it off after a moment. “Pardon, miss Xem. As I was saying,” he recomposed himself, “I will be asking some questions and then, if I find it suitable, we will talk about your future in the Academy of the Solace Equinox, is that alright with you?”

“Yes.” She answered, and quickly added “Messier.”

He smiled and nodded. “Very well.”

Messier Callun picked up a, now worn, sheet of parchment from the side and began reading.

“What are the three theories regarding the temporal alteration paradigm that led to the changing of the calendar year from two hundred days to three hundred and sixty-five, dating 8 pre-conf.?” He looked at her expectedly.

What? She looked at him aghast. She hadn’t studied recent events. The new calendar had only been in effect for eight years, she had been studying events from a hundred years ago! *One step at a time, Elliot.* What did she remember from that time? *Nothing, I was six!* She began sweating. She would fail the first question and it would all end there. She had to think. *One step at a time.* “Well… one of the theories…,” she began, not knowing where the sentence would end, “states that… hmm…” she drew a blank. There was nothing in her brain. Messier Callun looked at her, with pity in his eyes, and he could tell. Certainly, he knew.

“Very well, next question.” He said, not making any more comments, nor reacting.

Next question? It wasn’t over? But it might as well be. *He probably needs to go through some mandatory questions*.

Elliot slumped her shoulders and stared at the ground. It was over.

“What are the two pillars of the *Modern Arcanum Theoris*?”

She knew the answer but what was the point. She had already failed. Joining the Academy. *Pff*. It had been a silly dream.

“Runic chirography and Runic phonation, Messier.” She said, as if reading from a book.

He waited for an instant. “Very well.” He moved on to the next question.

At least I got one right. Then, she remembered something else she had read.

“What are the-”

“Wait!” She interrupted. “That is a trick question. There are three pillars. Runic chirography, Runic phonation, and Conception.” She stared right through him, almost in defiance, then cowered back. “Messier.” She added.

He smiled deviously, as if he was hungry. He set down the sheet. “And which one would you say is the most important?”

She thought for a moment. She had only read about the *Modern Arcanum Theoris*. She didn’t know any Runes, neither how to write them, nor how to said them. But she could conceptualize the effects. She could imagine what she wanted, and she could want it feverishly.

“Conception.”

Messier Callun didn’t react to her answer. He merely picked up the sheet and started on the next question, but Elliot could see a smile starting to form as his face disappeared behind the sheet.

She smiled to herself. Perhaps it wasn’t all lost.

He asked the next question. She answered it correctly. He moved on to the next and she answered it too. The fourth question was mathematical, and her experience working with her father, all those hours in the sun selling spices, finally paid off. She didn’t miss one single question out of the thirty he asked, besides the first. And who in their right minds cared about why they changed the calendar?

“That was the last question.” Said Messier Callun, after her lengthy answer about the importance of folklore in new urban

society. He looked at her, his wrinkled face focusing. He seemed to be holding in a smile.

She shook in her seat. She was soaked through with nervous sweat, as adrenalin rushed through her veins, pumping her into a state of exhilaration. Perhaps all was not lost. Perhaps joining the Academy wasn't just a dream.

"Miss Xem, from your test results I am happy to give you an invitation to join the Academy of the Solace Equinox." He signed a nice piece of paper and handed it to her.

She didn't remember standing up and taking the paper. She just noticed herself holding it. It was gilded in gold, and probably worth a lot of coin. Well worth the two silver she had paid.

"Now," Messier Callun said, "it says in your form that you are from Ichinard, so there is no need to explain to you how this works. You probably are well acquainted with the Academy, and the building, correct? At least the public areas."

He waited for her response. She must have nodded, though she didn't remember it, because he seemed content.

"Good, good. Here are two other forms you need to fill, as well as get signed by your parents." He cleared his throat. "And there is just one final thing." He waved his hand. Clearly, he didn't think this last thing was important. "You need to bleach your hair."

"Excuse me?" she asked, completely befuddled at the randomness of the request.

"Vernals must be blonde. It is a silly requirement. Completely outdated, but mandatory." He explained, as he finished setting the paperwork.

"Messier Callun, I… I can't aff… I can't afford that."

He looked at her, startled. As if the issue was entirely new to him. His face went from confusion to utter disgust. He stammered to reply. “I’m sorry, Miss Xem.” He said, defeated. “That invitation and those forms are valid for a week. If in seven days you don’t report to the Academy, you will have to take another test.”

“The last test was five years ago.” She realized.

“These are the rules, Miss.” He showed her the door to his left, where she was to exit. For a moment, she thought he was going to say something more. Perhaps offer to pay for the hair bleaching. But he didn’t say anything. She left the room and the Academy, the invitation in her hand, the same hand that also carried a dream.

***

Callun’s face drowned in his hands as the girl closed the door to the room. Twenty-two applicants done and she had been the best. And she was probably not going to attend the Academy because of an old, dumb rule. One of the applicants couldn’t read nor write. Yet, he brought another of those damned letters. He was going to become a Virgo because his parents could write a note of credit, while the boy couldn’t even spell his own name.

Some days, working for the Academy of the Solace Equinox ripped one’s heart and placed it right upon one’s hands. One could either hold it there or drop it. The Academy chose for him, and it chose to squeeze tightly. He took a deep breath. Fortunately, it was one of the last times he had to endure this.

He called the next applicant.

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At last, he was done. Defeated, he packed his things. The results of the tests and his reports would be kept safe for seven days. He would be long gone by the time the new Vernals and Virgos arrived at the Academy. There were no formal classes – the students had to find a tutor that guided them through their learning, while they fulfilled their job at the Academy. The Vernals handled the menial bureaucratic work, and the Virgo were responsible for the libraries. Therefore, there were no school terms like in many other teaching institutions, and students could start their path whenever they wanted, as long as they registered in less than seven days after receiving the invitation. Callun never accompanied that process. After admission day, he just wanted to forget.

He left the room and walked to the lobby to hand the reports to the Vernals. Vernal Cella and Xandra were gone – it was already nighttime – and two other Vernals, also blonde of hair, of course, talked with a tall gentleman at the counter.

"Well, Lorekeeper be noted. If it isn't Ministerial Messier Callun Trusk."

"Zenith Rondel." He said, surprised.

"I forgot it was admission day today. How was the recruitment? You looked downright haggard, friend."

Callun chuckled. "Exhausting. But there were some good kids. Perhaps a dozen new students. We'll see."

"Impressive."

Not at all. Callun thought with a sigh. He looked at the Zenith's hands. He seemed to be inspecting a package that contained a small book. "And you, is that the recruitment you spoke of? You know there are many more books if you go through that door?" He scoffed.

Zenith Rondel looked at the book and wrapped it in its package. He shrugged. “Not like this one. This one is special. Can you believe it was recovered from a random bandit? The things we find in these fishing holes.” He frowned.

“Some kind of spell book?” Callun asked. Some arcanists’ spell books would often find themselves trafficked after the owner’s death, and they could be very valuable. At least, that was what Callun had heard.

Rondel looked at the book for a moment, as if lost in thought. “No,” he said finally, “and yes.” He looked at Callun and smiled. “It is late, Messier. I should return this to the higher powers that be. May the Lorekeeper guide our paths together again in the future.” He nodded to the Vernals and left the building.

Callun wasn’t sure he wanted to meet the Zenith again. Likely not. He handed over the reports to the Vernals, thanked them for their help, and left. His work in Ichinard was done.

Before he could arrive at the door, one of the Vernals called to him.

“Messier, here is the gold you asked to withdraw from your account.”

He smiled. “Thank you, Vernal. That had completely lapsed my mind.”

I guess there is one last thing to do in this stinking dump of a city.

IV. BLINDSPOT

Elliot made her way home, utterly stupefied. That day had grown colder, the streets wetter, though there was no rain, and the people seemed angrier as they walked the stone-cobbled streets of Ichinard. It was past mid-afternoon. The sixth bell had rung. It was almost time for Elliot to be home and help her mother prepare for dinner. She was out of herself with grief for a dream freshly killed, but Elliot would not be late, she was never late.

Every few steps she looked back, searching for her freshly blonder friend. She wasn't ready to talk to her. At the moment she didn't care if Laed had gotten the invite or not. But of course she had. Laed usually got her way. Elliot couldn't really blame her. It really wasn't her fault, she hadn't chosen that life, but at the moment, Elliot didn't care.

She went by some backstreet alleys to avoid passing through Argen's house. He would want to know about the admission process, and she didn't want to tell him about it. She was sure he would be supportive, but she couldn't stand the look of pity that would overflow in his eyes. She made it home before half-past sixth bell. She waited for a moment at the door. No shouts. Father was probably not home yet, and her mother always became quieter as the day went on. She went inside.

Her mother had her back turned to her, facing the stove. The fire was already lit, making the room much more pleasant than the cold outside. Elliot muttered a quick ‘hello’ and headed upstairs to her room in the attic. It was a large room, but not very tall, as the roof was slanted. However, the reason Elliot loved the room was the large window that gave her a view over the city. On clear days, she could see the Mirrored Ocean in all of its expansive glory. Today was not such a day. She placed her things in the room and descended the creaking stairs to help her mother. She took a few deep breaths. She had decided to ask her if they could afford the bleaching. Perhaps they had some hidden funds that her father hadn’t yet lost. She would ask her mother first and, if it went well, they would check with her father, if need be.

She fearfully approached her mother, who stood with her back turned to Elliot. Her mother turned as Elliot stood there, wringing her hands, expectantly. Elliot prepared to speak.

A large bruise stained her mother’s pale complexion. A fresh bruise. It hadn’t been there this morning. Elliot quickly closed her mouth, cringing.

“Get the carrots from the pantry.” Said her mother. She didn’t raise her head much, perhaps to try to keep the bruise hidden. Her tone clearly stated she wasn’t going to talk about it. She didn’t ask Elliot about the admission process. *She as bigger things to worry about*, Elliot thought. She knew how her mother had gotten her bruise. The same way she had. They wouldn’t speak of it. They never did.

Elliot fetched the carrots, removing a small skrill from the green foliage. She instinctively smiled at the small carapaced critter, but the smile was quickly swallowed by her hopelessness. She couldn’t

ask her mother for coin. Even if she wasn't hurt, she knew it was too much to ask. The dream had to die.

They finished dinner in silence. They had everything ready by eighth bell. Her father didn't show up. They quietly ate dinner.

"Didn't you have your admission test today?" her mother suddenly asked.

Elliot perked up. Her mother had remembered the test. Could she tell her the truth? No, of course not. She didn't deserve to know the truth.

"I didn't make it. I'm sorry for wasting the coin."

Her mother sighed, then shrugged. "You can try again next time."

Elliot didn't say anything.

They had dinner in silence, and that was the best they could have.

***

It was late. The moon was full of light and stood in its place in the sky, completely surrounded by dark nothing. A few stars kept it company, but the moon was that which shone the brightest, like it didn't need the company. As if the moon knew what was best for itself. As if anything made sense.

Elliot sat on her bed with her back to the door, facing the window. She felt hopeless. Not lonely, but alone, as one did when one's dreams had died. What choices now did she have, if any? She heard the creaks on the stairs before the door quietly opened. Her father entered the room. That large beast of a man, filling the doorway and closing the space. He drunkenly stumbled towards her, barely keeping himself standing, the stench of cheap alcohol reaching her before he did. But he eventually did. Her father placed his hand on her shoulder, and she forgot everything.

***

The sun shined brightly. It warmed her. Not just her skin, but underneath it. It reached her bones, her core. It was life. It made her smile.

She twirled around, her luscious blonde hair floating, feeling her beautiful new dress dance around her, grazing the colourful array of flowers that surrounded her. They were tall flowers, reaching her mid-thigh. She stood in the open field, completely enveloped in colour. She felt free, and she could barely keep herself from running. She failed, of course, and she launched into a race with the wind. The flowers were so tall they kept her from sprinting, but she waved her hands and the flowers faded from her path, leaving a wide corridor of fluffy grass for her. She ran, barefoot, feeling every blade of grass, smelling every flower. Butterflies appeared around her, and enveloped her, an explosion of brightness in every thought. She kept running. There was no where she wanted to go, she hadn't the need for such primal instincts. It was only bliss that she felt. The earth birthed itself at her whim, rising and falling at her command, a mere thought.

As if by instinct, she jumped. The floor disappeared from under her, and she dove into the nothingness.

Splash. She was underwater, crystal clear water the same temperature as her body, so that she could hardly feel it. Her dress was gone, but she didn't feel naked. She felt complete, belonging in that space, protected by the surrounding water. She just moved, she wasn't, she just did. She hadn't a name, a self, she didn't require breath, nor thought, nor suffering. She was free from all that made one human, she was a story, she was neither here nor did she exist.

There was no water, but her flow didn't stop. She danced among the clouds, weightless, self-less, fulfilled. She soared higher and higher, as the sky became darker. Soon, there was a sea of stars around her, her dress having appeared cloaked with the night.

She wasn't.

And that was all she was.

Nothing at all.

And it was all she could be.

***

In the middle of the night, she made her way to her own tower. She didn't know how she got there, and she moved gingerly.

Her tower stood still as always, in the same place as always, abandoned as always. Elliot didn't quite understand why. It was what was left of an old watch castle, near the Gatesway Forest, in Ichinard. Before the King's Road was constructed, the Gatesway was the main path to the city, besides the port. But it had long been overgrown and brought to disuse. Most of the castle had fallen. The walls were mostly rubble, and the other buildings barely had ceilings anymore. It was a sad show of what once was. But not Elliot's tower.

Elliot's tower still stood. Proud, unmoving. It was ten stories tall, taller than any surrounding tree, and with a stone balcony around every floor. The door to the tower was long gone, but the stairs still stood. She climbed them, tightening her shawl. It was a cold night.

She exited to the last floor balcony, moving with the softest of steps. She reached the parapet and looked down. There was stone floor, covered in ivy, around the tower.

The balcony on the tenth floor was not complete, as it wasn't for most floors. On the eastern side, she could see the Mirrored. Bathed

in moonlight, it went on for miles, never ending, and hiding all that it contained. Elliot could see nothing in the horizon, so there was nothing she could reach for. There was nothing unattainable on that side because there was nothing there. On the south side, the ocean mocked her again. She couldn't see a single islet, not even when the moon was biggest and brightest like tonight. On the north side, there was no balcony left. She could barely see other towns. She knew of Magestall, right before she could see a hint of Xerxes Grove. All of it too far away, too out of sight, too foreign. The path to those places was once there but was now long destroyed. Crumbled.

That left the western side, where all was quiet.

The lack of silence was easily explained. To the west there was one great city, but not a large city. Drale was the place of the Hallow Grounds, where the gods signed the Treaty to leave the mortal plane. To abandon mankind. It was where the temples to the gods were built and, as a holy place, it carried a silence for miles. Looming above the far away city were the Charmed Slopes. The great mountain range carved its way to the west to join with the even greater Everlasting Range, which cut through the middle of Saiorse, north to south. But even though the Everlasting mountains were of enormous size, the Charmed were not any less imposing. To Elliot, they were the largest thing there was.

True, the Mirrored Ocean had no end, not one that she could see, at least. But, on a good day, she could see the peak of the mountains, and that made them larger than even an endless ocean.

And they were so far away. So unattainable, yet so present. It was akin to hope. And that was dangerous. She knew very well how dangerous hope was.

Elliot's tower was her perfect sanctuary. She went there often, just to look around. To escape and find a moment of respite. Sometimes, just to have hope. No matter how painful that was. She was very tired.

A cloud passed by the moon, partly blocking its light. That which passed danced upon the mountains, and together with the wind it seemed to speak. To call upon her. A call to fight.

She wept. She wept for her dead dreams. They were tears of powerlessness tearing through her cold, pale skin.

The mountains called again. But she was so very tired. She couldn't fight.

One step at a time. She walked forward to the parapet and looked down. Perhaps she didn't have to fight anymore.

She held the parapet tightly. The stone under her hands crumbled slightly and a small pebble released from the balcony. Underneath it, a tiny skrill, no bigger than a grain of rice, took flight and disappeared into the night.

Elliot took a deep breath. What else did she have to lose? If the smallest of skrill could escape from the stone and fly away, then why couldn't she hold on for a while longer? The invitation lasted for seven days. Perhaps the dream hadn't died. Not yet. Perhaps it had seven days to live. She stepped back from the edge of the balcony.

The other good thing about Elliot's tower was that it was abandoned. There was no one there, nor anywhere around it.

Well, no one but him.

He appeared, as she knew he might, from two too-close together trees. He wore a hooded cloak, but she knew it was him. The *Dealer*. She had named him as such since the first time she had seen him. He usually wore the hood up but had sometimes appeared without.

That was how she knew he couldn't be much older than her. Perhaps close to his twenties. Only slightly older than Argen. Though he was young, his eyes were darkened and mysterious. He appeared mostly on moonless nights, and always from the same place. There, as tonight, he waited for some other man, our group, to appear. The transactions were mostly silent. He gave something, and a clinking pouch was handed to him. Both parties would then disappear into the night.

During the transactions, Elliot kept extremely quiet. These were likely dangerous people, and she was nothing but a young girl, thin as a wafer, with no way to defend herself. Sometimes, just before disappearing, she could have sworn she saw Dealer look in her direction and wink. Surely she just imagined it.

Tonight's transaction went the same as any other. Tonight, there was no wink. Not that she was sure there were on the other nights, but tonight was unmistakable.

Shortly after, Elliot dared to move again. The sun was starting to peek from the east. She sat facing the rising star, her back against the cold stone of the tower. Seven days, then the dream would die.

V. HARING DEALINGS

To dye one's hair was seen as a luxury in most places of the Kriegan Kingdom. There were very few places in each city that even provided that service, and to do it at home was unthinkable. It was often a sign of wealth when a woman appeared with a small lock of hair that was a different colour, let alone the entire head of hair. There were, of course, natural dyes, but those didn't last very long, and didn't work well with darker hairs.

Elliot's hair, as if pranked by the gods, was as black as night. She mostly looked like her mother, but the hair, such blackness, was inherited from Wurf, her father. The only way for Elliot to dye her hair was to bleach it, which made the process even more expensive. Even if she could bleach her hair, and dye it, if need be, she would have to maintain it, and that meant more expense.

On her walk back to Ichinard, she had had enough of guessing at the cost. She had to know for sure, she needed to know the goal. But where to start? She didn't even know of a place that did it. She needed to find Laed.

It wasn't yet the ninth bell and, luckily, Laed waited by the Thornless Thornes. The wide smile in between her rosy cheeks let Elliot know the result of her test. Elliot tried to smile as she reached her shrieking friend.

“Elliot! Where did you go yesterday? I tried to find you after the test.” She didn’t wait for an answer. “I passed! Can you believe it? I’m going to be a Vernal!”

Elliot’s stomach twisted as she fake smiled. “That’s wonderful, Laed. Did the test go well, then?”

“Well? It was so easy. I don’t get why you studied for so long, just for a couple of questions about nothing important.” She said with a wave of her hand.

What?

“A couple of questions?”

“Yeah, we mostly talked about Grandma Thorne. Turns out she and Mr. Callun know each other quite well. Why? How was your test? Did it not go well? Oh, I’m so sorry, Elliot.” She grabbed Elliot’s hands.

“What? No, it went great. I aced the test. And *Messier Trusk* was very impressed.” She ripped her hands from Laed’s grasp.

Laed hesitated.

“Oh, of course, well, you studied so much, right? How great, Elliot, we are both going to be part of the Academy!”

Elliot’s stomach twisted some more, now adding anger to the mix. Laed had assumed she hadn’t passed the test. Was it because she hadn’t a famous grandmother? Or because she thought Elliot was dumb?

“Yes, we are!” She said, sounding more angry than happy. Something that, judging from Laed’s face, hadn’t gone unnoticed. “And I need to go prepare some things at home.”

“Alright.” Said Laed, straining her smile. “If we don’t see each other before, I’ll see you in seven days.”

"Yes, you will!" said Elliot, storming away from her friend, and containing huffs of frustration. She looked back and Laed seemed very confused, and… *is her hair even blonder today*? She noted, exasperated.

She failed to contain a huff.

She walked away from the market plaza, without a specific direction. How dare Laed assume such things of her? And now Elliot had said she was going to join the Academy. What would Laed think when she didn't appear in seven days? She would think Elliot had lied.

"Hey girl, where is my gold?" Elliot heard the voice of the old woman coming from the window. In her rootless stomping, she had instinctively walked home. "Tell that hack of a father that-"

Elliot was in no mood to hear that woman right now. She picked up a rock and threw it at the woman. She barely missed. Sadly.

"Leave her alone, you old hag." A voice shouted from a higher window. Argen.

Elliot looked at him, fury and tears in her eyes.

"I can stand up for myself!" She shouted. Then turned and walked away.

She didn't know where to go. Elliot wandered around for a while before giving in and returning home. She took another path, a longer path, to avoid the old woman as well as Argen.

As she got home, she found no one and went to her room. She curled up in her bed and closed her eyes for a moment, her body never stopping from being tense.

She woke up startled by to the sound of a body dropping to the ground. Elliot ran downstairs, peeking at the corner first. She saw her mother pick up Wurf, who was drooling blood. He could barely

stand up by himself, but it wasn't his usual drunken wabble. His leg appeared to be twisted in a strange angle, he had several bruises forming on his face, and one of his eyes was almost swollen shut. He wore the same clothing as the night before, but they were torn and ripped, wet in some places, a few with already dried blood stains. Elliot ran to grab him on the other side to help her mother, and together they took him to the master bedroom where they laid him on the bed.

As Elliot took his clothes and placed him under the covers, her mother went to fetch a white bottle, which was heavily corked. She took the cork and poured the milky blue liquid in a cup. Carefully, she spoon-fed Wurf the liquid that Elliot knew to be a numbing medicine. It would knock him out and help remove the pain so he could rest.

As both women left the room, her mother shut the door just as Wurf moaned something imperceptible in his last moments of consciousness.

"What happened?" Elliot whispered.

Her mother sighed and walked away from the door.

"The Arms of Kriegan dropped him at the door like that. They said they found him in an alley, beaten. They suspect it was a robbery. Apparently he kept saying something about someone taking his new pouch." She sat at the kitchen table and poured herself a cup of water. She sank her head in her hands.

Something twisted inside Elliot's stomach. She wasn't sure she felt bad for her father. And that made her feel even worse. What kind of daughter would want her father to be beaten and left in an alleyway? Luckily, that question hadn't been part of the admission test because it would be another she wouldn't be able to answer. She

actually chuckled at that thought. She coughed to hide the laugh form her mother. *What a dumb joke at a time like this*.

"Elliot, stay here. I need to go to the market and buy some things for dinner and the next couple of days. I don't think you father can eat anything else than mush for a few days." She rose and left the house.

Elliot was left alone in the kitchen.

She began to think. She still had a problem to solve, and one less day to do it. She needed to find the gold to bleach her hair. And now another problem had fallen on her lap. *Well…* What if it wasn't a problem?

Her heart began racing at the idea. Her father had a successful business. She knew that. And he owed coin to several people from different loans. She knew that too, obviously. But where was all that gold? There was no place her father could spend all that coin, was there? She would know if he had other homes or was spending gold on rich clothes. Everyone knew each other around here, surely she would know. That meant that he was keeping the gold for himself. And where else would he keep it, if not in his chambers? Her mother was almost always home. She would be gone for a while now. And her father… Her mother had poured a lot of medicine.

She walked to the master room and cracked open the door. Her father snored louder than usual – perhaps the sign of a broken nose. He was knocked out cold. The medicine was powerful. It was her chance.

Her heartbeat pounded like a drum as she opened the door. The hinges shouted and Wurf moved. She stopped. He continued snoring. She walked inside. She moved on her tip toes and dropped to the ground to check under the bed. There was nothing there but

dust. In the cabinet there were only clothes, and her father didn't handle those himself, so he never opened the cabinet. But he had a large trunk on his side of the bed. She walked to that side, being very careful not to make any sound.

She got next to the trunk. She had seen it many times, but never had had the need to touch it. It was large. Elliot could easily fit inside. It had a metal latch. She knelt. Her knees cracked loudly.

Wurf moved. He turned in the bed, laying on his side, facing her directly. Sadly, his likely broken ribs were on the other side. She held her breath and didn't move. There was silence. She slowly turned, looking at him. He was such a small, sad man. The scruff on his face only served to dirty his appearance even more and the bruises disfigured him. He was disgusting. She hated him and found herself feeling angry. Why hadn't he died? He began snoring again. Elliot exhaled. She turned back to the chest.

What if her father woke up? He could barely move. Could she take him then? Could she defend herself? She had to shake off those feelings. She had to focus. She wasn't a murderer. She just wanted to escape.

Elliot lifted the latch and opened the trunk. He hadn't even bothered to lock it.

The smell of spices hit her like a punch, and she had to use everything in her power not to cough or sneeze. Sweet smells overwhelmed her, the peppery spices tickled her nose, the acre scents turned her stomach, but she managed to stay silent. Of course the trunk was full of spices. Wurf was a spice merchant. But something seemed strange to Elliot. She had grown with her father's business, she had helped around and she was rather familiar with most of what he dealt. But some of those smells were foreign to her.

The colours were off. Perhaps the spices had gone bad from being locked in the trunk. Elliot didn't know how long they had been there. She started rummaging through the different bags, accompanied by the sound of Wurf's snoring. Perhaps she could sell the spices? No, she couldn't do that, especially not knowing what most of them were. But… *in times of peril, even the house cat is feral*. But could she be that person, even as a last resort?

Her hand hit something solid inside a bag. She heard clinking metal.

She stopped.

The snoring did not.

She looked to her father and saw that he was still out. Seeing his face didn't make her feel any safer.

She took the bag of what she assumed were coins. It was heavier than she expected. Perhaps she didn't need to be the feral cat. Elliot held the bag tightly against her body not to make any noise and ran to her room.

She locked the door.

She didn't really know why, her father was in no condition to climb the stairs and she would hear her mother arrive home. But better safe. The fifth bell rang. Soon, it would be time to prepare dinner, and her mother still wasn't home. *Why am I thinking about dinner, right now?* She thought to herself. She wasn't even hungry. Come to think of it, she hadn't been hungry all day. The thought of eating actually made her nauseous.

The bag was heavy. Well, heavy for a coin pouch. She messed around with it in her hands. It was definitely full of coins. With shallow breaths, she opened it.

Not just coins. Gold coins.

She gasped. Each one of those gold coins was worth ten times as much as a silver coin, and a silver coin was enough to feed a family for a week. There were twenty gold coins in that bag.

Elliot began to sob. She tried to control her tears but then just started hyperventilating.

It wasn't her money. But it solved everything. She could take it and leave. She could join the Academy and never look back. She could pack her things right now and go away before her mother got ho-. Her mother. She couldn't leave her mother alone with Wurf.

Could she?

Elliot got up from the bed and paced her room. *What to do?*

Her mother always pro-… She always hel-… Elliot couldn't say for certain she could leave, but she had to know. She had to know if she could. A chance, at least.

She ran from her home, leaving the coins behind, tucked deep beneath her mattress. She had to find a place where they bleached hair. Where did the ladies go? A barber? No, that was for boys. Elliot's mother had always cut her hair at home, so she didn't know.

She lived right next to the main market in Ichinard, something had to be there. And Laed couldn't have gone too far to get her hair done. Elliot ran around frantically, getting further and further away from the plaza. As the sixth bell rang, a small sign caught her eye. 'Lady Favour, a Women's medicine and Aesthetic care'.

Without a thought crossing her mind, she entered.

Elliot was, for the second time this afternoon, quickly overwhelmed by the sweet scents and flowery atmosphere in the establishment. It was richly decorated with trailing ivy, expertly placed plumes of light pink, tasteful tapestries covering the walls and giving a warm and inviting feeling. As a first reaction, it was all

too much. She was sweaty, there was dust and drops of her father's blood on her clothes, which weren't new, or colourful. In sum, the place was everything that Elliot was not. After the initial shock passed, she realized that she wanted to be. She wanted to feel that warmth everywhere; the sense of welcome, the colours! She wanted to smell like flowers, wear pink plumes around her shoulders instead of her grey, old shawl.

"Are you alright, dear?" asked an approaching woman.

Elliot's eyes, which were already wide, opened even more. She had thought that Laed had looked so grown up and put together the day before, with her new hair and clothes. She now realized that her friend just looked like a girl trying on her mother's clothes. This in front of her was a woman. She was in the right place. This was the woman that would change Elliot's life.

"The weather is about to turn, are you sure you should be wandering around?" she asked concerned.

Elliot snapped out of her awe. She stammered for a moment, trying to find the words. "D-d-d do you tend to women's hairs here, in this- hmm, place?" she tried to sound as ladylike as possible, but Elliot was far too nervous. She didn't belong. Not yet.

The woman relaxed as Elliot spoke. She smiled a warm smile. "Yes, I do. You can call me Luria." She looked at Elliot's dark, stringy hair and even managed not to twist her nose. "Do you want to cut it? Wash?"

"I need to bleach my hair." Elliot spat out.

Luria drew back, seemingly shocked.

"Oh. Dear…hmm…" she hesitated, trying to find the right words. Did she think Elliot didn't have money and couldn't afford it? "You

have the blackest of hairs, it is so beautiful. Women pay a lot of gold to have hair like yours. Are you sure?"

"I *need* it." Elliot emphasized.

"Alright. How light are we talking?"

How light? What in the hells does that even mean. "I just need to be blonde. You know, light yellow hair. Like the Vernals of the Academy."

"Ah." Said the woman, apparently now understanding the situation. She seemed concerned. "Alright. It is a difficult process, do you understand that? Since your hair is so dark. It will take a few applications."

"How long will it take?"

"Well, I can see you are in a hurry. Perhaps five days. And it is going to be costl-"

"How much?" Elliot's heart stopped beating. She couldn't breathe. Luria's face, so fair, moved in slow motion.

"For the full process…" she focused as she thought of a number. Her eyes showed pity for Elliot, and that wasn't just in Elliot's imagination. She could see it, she could feel it. It was palpable in the room.

"I can do it for forty gold coins." The woman said in what she must have thought was a friendly smile.

Elliot audibly gasped. Without a word she stumbled out of the shop into the street. It had begun raining.

Forty gold coins. Double of what she had. Which was twice as much coin as she had ever seen together. It was just another nail in the coffin of her broken dream, but she couldn't yet give up.

Elliot looked at the large clock tower. It was almost half past sixth bell. She had to be home to help her mother prepare dinner. And Elliot was never late. She couldn’t be late. She wouldn’t be late.

She wiped her eyes and ran home.

VI. BEHIND STORMS

She made it home on time. Elliot was never late. She had cried it all during the run. She would find another solution. She had to. There were still six days left.

Her mother was already by the fire, tending to the pot. Elliot cleaned her face as she entered.

“Where were you?” She looked through the window. The rain had gotten heavier.

“I had to go give something to Laed.” Elliot lied easily. She had used that lie plenty.

A big gust of wind pushed the rain against the window, slamming it as if it were tiny shards of glass. A thunder roared in the distance.

“It’s going to be worse in a couple of hours.”

“What is? The rain?” Elliot asked confused.

“Honestly, where have you had your head in the last few days? Didn’t you hear the crier today? That is not just rain, nor is it just a storm.” She walked to the door and turned the bolt, then shuttered the windows. “A small hurricane is passing through all of the eastern cost. We’re locked in here for three days.”

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Luckily, her father had been beaten pretty badly. That was a sad thought to have, but it was the done that kept Elliot sane for two

days. The ‘small’ hurricane had been going endlessly for a while, and the three of them hadn’t left the house once.

Elliot and her mother didn’t talk much. There was nothing to say. Elliot had only one think on her mind, and she couldn’t share it. Who knew what her mother thought. She had slept on the common area the last two nights, curled up in blankets. They would eat diner, her mother would feed Wurf, and then she would lay down. Elliot usually went to her room and stayed there, staring at the window, cringing at every creak of wood.

Wurf was still bed ridden. He lay in his bed, a small, wrinkled little helpless man. His wounds were healing but he still didn’t talk much, except to ask for food or help to do his business. That was the only good thing that happened. Even though they were locked inside with him, it was like he was away. Which was a good thing. Even her mother had taken a break from screaming in the mornings. She would spend her days tending to Wurf, then taking care of the house. And ignoring Elliot.

On the third day, which was supposed to be the last day of the hurricane, Elliot was preparing lunch. Her absent mind still kept thinking about how she would get the coin. She needed to double what she had. What she had stolen. And she was running out of time. By the next day, she would have only three days until she had to stand in the Academy, ready to begin. She still didn’t have a plan.

“Elliot,” her mother called, “prepare your father’s meal. He can sit on his bed now, so you just have to take it to him. Don’t forget the medicine. Two spoonfuls.” She nodded to the white bottle. For every meal, Elliot’s mother had given Wurf the medicine. When he started talking too much, she thought she saw her mother pour some

extra. It was very strong medicine and needed to be poured carefully lest one overdosed.

Elliot filled a bowl with the stew. She placed the bowl on the table and fetched the bottle of medicine. She found her hands to be shaking. Elliot grabbed the bottle and poured it to fill a spoon. She did and poured the liquid in the stew. She poured another. Then she froze.

Two spoonfuls of medicine put her father to sleep for a few hours. *What would three spoonfuls do?*

She began to sweat.

Perhaps she had been looking for an escape in the wrong place.

What would four spoonfuls do?

It would be so easy, wouldn't it?

What would happen if she poured half of the-

"Elliot."

She startled and dropped the bottle. It clanked on the table. She quickly picked it up, having only spilled a little.

"Don't."

"Bu-"

"Elliot. He is your father." Her mother's face tensed. Her eyes pooled with water and her face turned red. The bruise on her cheek was still there, now a darker shade.

"He… is…" Elliot whispered, holding back her tears. She had had enough of those.

"Your father." Her mother said quietly.

They stood silent for a moment. Too many words were spoken in that silence.

Elliot stepped back and went to her room. Before she went up the stairs she saw her mother pick up the bottle and store it. She then picked the bowl with the food and carried it to the master bedroom.

Elliot sat alone on her bed, knowing that at least there wouldn’t be any creaks in the stairs tonight.

VII. ALL THAT GLITTERS

A storm passed. Not quickly, not easily, but it passed. The streets were surprisingly the cleanest they had been in months. Ichinard was a coastal city that was used to storms. It had been built to endure. Fortunately, the trash that often accumulated in the streets was not, so it was as if the city had been scrubbed clean.

Elliot left the house very early. She saw many people walking around, stretching their legs and going back to their usual lives, happy to be outside their home for the first time in three days. The air smelled clean, as if the hurricane had cleansed its impurities. It was, of course, the same old city.

Elliot had three days until everything ended. And she didn't know where to begin. She had half the coin she needed, and anyway she had not enough time to bleach her hair, if the Luria's opinion was the be trusted. She walked aimlessly through the city. Perhaps something would give her an idea.

Perhaps I could wear a wig. She actually laughed at the thought. The biggest magic institution in the whole of Vrania, and she, a fourteen year old girl from Ichinard, would fool them by wearing a blonde wig. Perhaps she was actually very dumb indeed and shouldn't join the Academy.

She found herself walking the quay near the northern promenade. The hurricane left in its tail air with very little moisture and it was

warm without even a soft breeze the ease the uncharacteristic heat. After three days locked up, Elliot appreciated the warmth that the sun brought her. It made her feel a little light-headed, but she hadn't eaten much, so she figured it was normal.

She saw the sailors ready their ships. They must have been eager to return to sea, after that time locked up. She saw that one of the boats was actually in the process of docking, which meant it had been out during the hurricane. Who would be that insane? Smugglers, that knew that the seas weren't being watched? Daredevils, that sought thrills to fell alive? Or regular men and women that needed to work to feed their families?

The sun was getting hotter.

It was all very sudden. Elliot hear someone shout her name and saw them approach her, picking up speed towards her. They moved with a blur, jumping from side to side, then they turned the whole world on its side, and blocked the sun. She knocked her head on the planks and fell into the cold water.

Elliot emerged from the depths of darkness to the freshly unblocked sun. Something next to her was grabbing her. Someone. There were people shouting around her and she couldn't identify their exact location. But she knew she was in the water. Four more hands grabbed her and pulled her out, dropping her in the planks.

Then, they helped the someone that was next to her on the water.

"Elliot," the someone said, "are you alright? Can you hear me?"

The three men helped her sit straight. "Elliot?"

"She just fell right down the water, never seen anything like it." One of the voices said. It was heavily accented.

"Right down she went. Must have been the sun, poor thing. She ain't thicker than an ore." The other said.

She began to grow more aware of herself. She was freezing, completely soaked through, and surrounded by three strange men.

“Give me that.” Said the voice of the ‘someone’. He cloaked her with blanket someone handed him. “Do you know where you are, Elliot?”

It was Argen.

“I… what happened? How are you here?”

“I saw you wander around in Ichinard, and you didn’t look right. So, well… I kind of followed you. Not in a creepy way, I swear.”

“It sounds creepy, boy.” Said one of the sailors.

“Hmm… can you stand, Elliot?”

She nodded. He helped her up. “Thank you for the help, gentlemen.” He tossed them a coin and walked away, letting Elliot support herself on his arm.

“You were saying how you were following me in a creepy way.” Said Elliot, tightening the blanket around herself. Argen was also entirely soaked, but he didn’t seem to need the blanket.

“Hilarious. Well, I followed you here. Then you started wabbling and you looked like you were going to pass out and I ran towards you. I was late, and you fell in the water.”

“And you thought a good idea to jump after me?”

“I couldn’t let you drown.”

Elliot blushed, and since she was so cold she actually felt the blood rushing to her cheeks.

“Thank you.” She was quiet for a moment as they walked. “And I’m sorry for yelling at you the other day.”

He scoffed. “It’s fine. That woman could make anyone lose their mind. What were you doing here anyway? Don’t tell me you were catching a ship.”

She sighed. “No, I was just thinking.”

“I see. Walking also helps me think. Any big problems?”

“You can say that.”

“Can I help?”

“Argen, look-”

“No, Elliot.” He stopped, turned to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Why won’t you let me help you?”

Because I shouldn’t need to. She couldn’t say that. It sound silly, even though it was what she thought.

“I need to do this myself.”

“Do what? At least tell me.”

“I… Argen, I…” What could she say that he could understand?

He shook his head, defeated. “You should catch a ship, actually. You are too good for this.”

“For what?”

“For this city. For your mother. For that mon-” he held his tongue and took a deep breath as if he was swallowing something very big and nasty.

“Argen, I am trying to leave. But not like that.”

“Then how? I will help you.”

“I have an invitation for the Academy.”

“You passed the test! Of course, you did, I knew you would. See, like I said. You are too good for this.”

“I don’t think I can go.” She said, and it hurt more than the cold.

“Why? Is it expensive?”

“Yes.”

“Elliot, I… I can help with that. My father has started paying me for my work, I am no longer just the apprentice. How much do you need?”

“Argen, I can’t take your coin.”

“You are not taking anything, I am giving it to you. How much? Two, three gold coins?”

She looked down and didn’t answer. In other circumstances, three gold coins was an enormous amount of gold.

Argen was taken aback. “I can do five gold coins. Maybe more if you give me time.”

“Argen, that is not nearly enough. I’m sorry.”

“Oh.” He said, finally realizing the situation. For Elliot, it was like hearing it for the first time. The disappointment in his voice was palpable.

“Then leave.” He said.

“What?”

“Leave. Take the ship. Pack your things. Leave. You can’t stay here, Elliot.”

“I can’t leave. Where would I go? All I have is here.”

“All you have will kill you.” Argen said exasperated. “Everyone can see it but you, Elliot. You will drown. Everybody knows. You *have* to leave.”

She pushed him away. It was if her secrets had been shouted by the city crier. But they hadn’t been her secrets, apparently.

“I will take care of myself, Argen. I don’t want your pity.”

“Elliot, that is not wha-”

“Don’t follow me this time. I wouldn’t want you drowning with me.”

She walked away, glad that there was no wind to chill her wet clothes. Sad, that there was nothing to blind her from the pity in Argen’s eyes.

***

She managed to go home and change out of her wet clothes. As she left the house again, her father called her. She pretended not to hear and left. She would deal with that another day.

Elliot went to her tower. No one would follow her there, she hoped. She sat there, on the highest balcony, her back against the stone wall of the tower, looking at the sky. What could she do?

She didn't know so she did nothing. Her stomach growled and she realized she still hadn't eaten. The sun felt wonderful on her skin. Elliot closed her eyes just for a second.

***

Elliot stood on a beach. The waves crashed behind her, but they had left their violence elsewhere. The coming and going of the water was soothing, all enveloping and inviting. The wind brought her the smell of the ocean. It brought the salt, which laid on her uncovered skin. It brought her life.

She walked towards that life. How could she not? The water was warm. Before she could notice she was already waist deep in the ocean. Then, she noticed the beach was actually on a small island. There was nothing else around. She danced with her hand beneath the water. Elliot smiled. Truly.

The island faded from her sights. She thought nothing of it. There was nothing for her at the surface so she dove straight into the deep. She was so strong! Soon she couldn't see the sun above the water. Was she really capable of such things? To swim that fast? Elliot twirled in the water, weightless. Free.

But it was a dream, of course. She woke up.

***

It was night. Way past eighth bell. There was no sun the be seen in the dark sky. She hadn't gone home. Would her mother be worried? Surely not.

Elliot heard voices. *The Dealer!* She thought.

Quietly, she leaned over the parapet and looked down. There he was. Tonight, he wore no hood. The warmth of the day had carried on into the night. He had very short, dark hair, and a stubble on his face. From this height she couldn't see any other traits.

He waited as a group approached. They wore cloaks. There were at least three men. The Dealer approached and handed them a pouch. Now they would hand him another in turn, likely with gold. She had seen it so many times. A wild thought passed through her mind. Could she steal that gold? Her stomach growled. What a stupid idea.

She focused on the trade again. Something was wrong. The men were not giving the Dealer anything. In fact, they drew small swords and pointed them at him, as they walked away. She could hear they were speaking but couldn't understand what they said.

Run! She wanted to scream to the Dealer. He couldn't take three armed men. Even if carried a blade, which he didn't seem to do, he was one against three.

But he didn't even try to draw a blade. He waved his hand in a fluid motion, drawing something in the air, and his hand burst into flames.

Magic. She clutched the parapet. The flame illuminated the area around him, an orange glow tinting the fright in the men's faces.

He held the fire in his hand and the men grew more fearful.

Such power.

The men put their pouch on the ground and walked away. As they reached a safe distance, Elliot saw them run. She tightened her grip on the parapet, loosening a few stones.

They tumbled down and fell near the Dealer.

He put out the fire and walked to the pouch left by the other men. He inspected it and placed it in his pocket. He was silent for a moment, but he didn't disappear back into the trees.

Eventually, he spoke, loud enough for Elliot to hear.

"You are good. It took a while before you revealed yourself. I am impressed. Come down." He had a much younger voice that Elliot had anticipated. It wasn't gruff, nor deep. Yet, it was commanding, and she feared it wasn't a request.

She walked down the stairs, noticing her hunger at each floor.

She peeked from the door. He was older than she thought. Still not much older that Argen, but surely in his mid-twenties. He had a few scars on his face, nothing that couldn't be due to a small scruff between friends. They made him more handsome.

"Wow, you are beautiful. I wasn't expecting that." He said to her.

Elliot blushed. She had never been called beautiful.

"Come out." She shyly walked out from her tower. "I've heard you up there before. Do you go there just to spy on me, or are there others?" He gave her a mischievous grin.

"Just you. And I don't spy on purpose."

"Oh, that makes me sad. Why do you spy on me, then?"

"I.. I just like it up there, and you just happen to come here for your…" She didn't finish.

He raised an eyebrow and smile. "Come on, you can say it."

She cleared her throat. "*Dealings*."

He laughed. “Dealing. I like that. Yes, this is a good spot for my dealings. We all got to make a living somehow, right…?” He looked at her expectantly.

“Elliot.” She blurted out.

“Elliot.” He repeated. “Nice to meet you, Elliot.” He didn’t say his name. She didn’t much care, for she had other things on her mind.

“You did magic.”

That got his attention.

“I did.” He looked straight at her.

“Can you teach me?”

He frowned, staring at her. It was a little unsettling. But she also liked it. There was a danger to him.

“That depends. What do you need to learn?”

“How to bleach my hair. I have two days.” She said without thinking.

He eyed her curiously.

“We can do that. Be here tomorrow at eleventh bell. Don’t be late, Elliot.” He looked at her, gave her a final grin, and disappeared between the trees.

With his smile, Elliot received hope. Perhaps there was a still a change. And she was never late.

VIII. A LINE IN THE DIRT

She barely slept. Elliot spent all night twisting and turning in her bed. What would the Dealer teach her? What did he want in return? He hadn't asked for anything, not yet. But he was a dealer. A merchant. She had seen him give something so he could receive something else. And she had seen how he dealt when he didn't get what he wanted.

Was she ready to pay the price? She was. She would give him everything he wanted.

During the day Elliot was quiet. She behaved exactly as it was expected of her. She helped cook and tend to the house, she poured her father's medicine properly and brough him the bowl of food. He was better and insisted on eating by himself. Elliot worried he would check the trunk, but he hadn't, and if he had, at least he hadn't said anything. She couldn't decide which was worse, so she buried that concern very deep.

She stayed home during the day. From the window in her room she saw Argen walk by her street. He stopped near her door and looked at it for a few seconds before lowering his head and walking away. She felt sorry for him. He was just trying to help. It didn't matter.

I have burned that bridge, now I just have to swim through the rubble.

At half past sixth bell, she was ready to help with supper. All along she had a fever growing inside of her. A want. A need. She could sense how close she was to being free.

When her mother went to sleep – now back in the master bedroom – Elliot snuck out of the house.

She wore her shawl and tightened it around her neck. It was a cold night. Luckily, still no rain.

That lack of rain, mixed with the out of season heat left by the hurricane, made Ichinard smell very strongly of fish. Elliot could barely feel it, of course. She had lived there her whole life, she had grown mostly nose blind to that particular smell.

She reached her tower and climbed the stairs to her usual spot. It was still early. She preferred to arrive early. And she waited.

Despite her eagerness she had the good consciousness to eat supper, thought she barely chewed. Therefore, she managed not to pass out again and remained awake, staring at the ground, carefully listening to any strange sound.

At eleventh bell, when the cloud glazed over the waning moon, he appeared.

She ran down the tower and appeared at the door.

“I was afraid you weren’t going to show up.” She said, coyly from behind the doorframe.

He smirked. “And miss the chance of seeing you? I would think not.”

Elliot blushed.

He walked around the perimeter of the tower, then, seemingly satisfied, sat on a proud boulder. He pointed to another as such in front of him. “Come, sit.”

She did.

“Are you prepared?” He said it like an invitation. Like a performer calling to his audience. She could see it in his eyes. He relished in this.

She nodded.

“I understand you are in a hurry. I know why, little one. And I feel for you. But that won’t matter for what we do here. You need to put that aside. You need to focus. It will not be easy, and by no means will you understand all there is when it comes to the arcane. Since we don’t have much time, I will tell you only what you need to know.”

She nodded and waited eagerly. He could sense that, so he kept her waiting.

“There are two pillars to the Modern Arcanum Theoris, or magic, as we mortals call it.”

“Three.” Said Elliot.

He smirked.

“No. There are two. There are the Runes, which is how we channel magic, and there is the Conception, which is how we mould it.”

Elliot’s stomach dropped a little. She had been so proud of her answer in the test. Turns out she had been wrong.

“Now, Conception doesn’t matter. Despite what you must have read in books, and what they try to teach you in that place, Conception is useless when you have the right Runes. There are ways to fake the Conception to ease the process. Now the Runes have three components: Essence, which is what the Rune means, what it is; Phonation, that is, how you speak the Runes; and Chirography, which is how you write the Runes. All of these components are important, but there are also ways to fake them. All

of them except Essence." He saw her inquisitive look. "Wands, for example, are used to fake Chirography. They guide your motions, and you don't need to write the Rune, you can simply trace it in the air."

"That is what you did. But you didn't have a wand."

"You noticed. Good." He smiled at her, which made her blush. He didn't explain any further. "Now, Phonation cannot actually be faked, but it is not really necessary either, thought it takes some practice. Now, there is one final thing, and that is called a Matrix. By using one Rune, you have a one-dimensional matrix. By combining two Runes, you have a two-dimensional matrix. By combining three, you have a three-dimensional matrix. So on and so forth."

"Why does it take so long to learn this at the Academy? You just taught me everything."

He laughed out loud. It was a pleasant laugh, though Elliot didn't understand what was funny.

"Because you have to write a Rune in a very specific way, using very specific materials, say it in a very specific accent, and a very specific tone and volume, and choose a very specific Rune that you can Conceptualize in a very specific way. Then, you add another Rune, and another, and another, and another. All of them perfectly, exactly as they are meant to be."

"But if I get it wrong nothing happens, right? It just fades out and I just try again."

He picked up a stick a drew a line in the dirt. The he crossed it, then did three more lines, and then a circle. He looked at her with intensity. Not violence, just intensity. She couldn't look away.

“This Rune is called Rage.” His voice lowered, until he was almost whispering. He looked down to the Rune and she followed. “If this small line is out of this circle, even if by a hair, and I cast this Rune, which at that point is called a spell, the earth itself would swallow me, and I would be no more.”

She couldn’t say anything. Elliot realized at that moment that she would try to cast a spell that could possibly kill her.

He drew back and relaxed. “But don’t worry. This is just an extreme example. It’s called the ‘Wizard’s Humbler Axiom’. Most times the effects are not as bad, if at all.” He laughed. “You should see your face.”

“Not funny.” She slapped his arm playfully. “And that name is terrible.”

“They are a weird bunch. Ironic to the bone.”

“I can see that. But… what spell do I have to cast?”

“Now that you know the basis, the spell to bleach that gorgeous hair is a three-dimensional matrix, using Light, Rage, and Void.”

“Three Runes?” she gasped.

“Yes, but that is why I’m here. I can teach you. We will practice.”

“Can’t you do it for me?” She pleaded.

“No. this is a personal spell. You need to do it.”

***

Three hours went by quick. Dealer had the Runes written on a piece of parchment and she practiced writing them and saying them at the same time. She didn’t cast the spell, not yet.

“Without Conception, these are just words and symbols”. He had said.

So, she repeated it, again and again. He corrected her almost every time. By the end her hand was cramping, but she knew the words. She knew how to say them perfectly and how to write them. She felt really good about herself.

“What time do you have to sign up at the Academy tomorrow?” he asked.

“I have until midnight.” She frowned. “Why?”

“There is a bit of bad news I haven’t told you.”

Her heart sank. He started pacing the bottom of the tower.

“I told you earlier there was a way to fake Conception. There is. Conception is the harder of the components of the spell. Without it, these are just words, like I said. You didn’t have time to learn Conception. However,… faking Conception is… costly. I am sorry, I would have told you sooner, but you needed to focus first. I needed to know that you could do this. It is also hard to get, but I will handle that for you. But I can’t buy it for you.”

“Why are you helping me?” she asked.

He approached and held her hands. He was much bigger than Elliot.

“Because you are special, Elliot. Do you really want this?”

“I will do anything.” She pleaded. And she meant it. “Is twenty gold coins enough?”

He hesitated for a moment. Thoughts seemed to be running around in his head. “It will have to be. You can’t do the spell without this.”

“Let’s do this.” She said, tears filling her eyes.

He let go of her hands.

“I will get this for you, Elliot. Meet me here tomorrow at tenth bell. Sharp. Don’t be late.”

"At night? I won't have enough time to get to the Academy."

"This item is hard to come by. You will make it, Elliot. Trust me." He kissed her forehead. "You will do this."

Dealer walked away and vanished amidst the trees.

Elliot couldn't move for a few minutes. It all felt like a dream.

She drew the Runes for another hour, then went home one final time.

IX. LIGHT, VOID, RAGE

"Where have you been?"

She had barely set foot inside the house.

Elliot entered. It was the middle of the night. Everyone should have been asleep. Standing in the middle of the room was her mother, arms crossed, deep bags under her eyes.

"Go on, tell me." She was murmuring, barely more than whispering.

Elliot closed the door. "Catching some air. I was locked in here for two days."

"That is a lie. You are lying to me." Her mother stared her down.

What do you care? Elliot thought.

"It doesn't matter if you believe me. I'm home and I'm safe. I'm going to my room." She walked past her mother, heading for the stairs. Her mother grabbed her arm.

"Elliot. You might not understand this yet, but one day you will. It is dangerous out there."

"And it's safe in here?" She asked, raising her voice.

"Shh!" Her mother looked towards the master room. Elliot scoffed. "You are too young to understand some things, but you will thank me one day."

Elliot ripped her arm free. Her lip quivered. She felt disgusted by her mother. She knew. How could she possibly not know?

"You will never touch me again." Was all Elliot could say. She walked up the stairs and shut herself in her room, leaving her mother standing in the middle of the room.

***

She couldn't be angry. She had to focus. She needed to sleep. But how dare she? How dare her mother meddle in her business? How dare she try to protect Elliot now, after… after everything?

The night was spent writhing around in her bed, wild thoughts running through her mind. She got a few moments of sleep, but she dreamt of Runes. They were of a giant size, and she was climbing them as if they were mountains, but once she was halfway to the top their surface would become slippery, and she would tumble down, only to try again.

She woke up even more tired than before.

Elliot forced herself to get up, get dressed and be normal. It was harder than the day before. This was the last day. She had things to do. Breakfast was quick and silent. The two women didn't look at each other, nor did they speak. Wurf was still in his bed, thought Elliot suspected it was now out of laziness and not injury. Either way, she was glad for his absence.

She spent the day packing her bags. She didn't own much, but she wanted to be ready.

Elliot was ready. Finally, after so much, she felt she had some control over her own life. After today she could start anew.

At sixth bell she packed up the coin pouch and left. She didn't make it to the dinner preparations.

Elliot then waited in her tower. Then she climbed down the stairs and waited by the two boulders. Then she went up again and stared at the sky. A soft rain started to fall.

She climbed the stairs again and began practicing the Runes on the fresh mud. *Light, Void, Rage*. She was confident in the way she was drawing the Runes, thought without Dealer there, she could never be sure.

It was tenth bell. At last. She waited, not so patiently, pacing around the entrance to the tower. It was a proper rain now, so she took shelter inside the tower, but would sometimes walk outside and the fresh water felt good on her skin. It was almost eleventh bell when he showed up.

“I thought you weren’t coming.” She said, clutching her hands.

He smirked. “It was harder to get a hold of this than I thought.” He walked towards her and placed his hand inside his jacket to take out the item. Quickly, he stepped in her direction and punched her in the gut.

Elliot folded over his fist and dropped to the ground. She took a moment to recover her breath, but the ache in her stomach was there.

“You know,” said Dealer, “I really do like you. That is why I am doing this.” He crouched next to her. “You are not ready. You cannot do this, child.” He rummaged her pockets, taking out the coin pouch. Elliot grabbed his hand and pulled, but she was weak.

He yanked it out of her grasp, her nails opening his skin. He punched her in the face. She dropped, her lip bleeding profusely.

“Ouch! You actually drew blood. Maybe you have got what it takes after all.” He opened the pouch and saw the gold coins. “And you actually have the gold.” He laughed out loud. “Amazing. I

didn't believe it at all." Dealer looked at her, down in the mud, the rain falling on her frail frame.

"Why did you teach me those things?" She whimpered.

Elliot tried to stand, but it was like her whole body was in shock. *How could I have been so stupid?*

"I wanted to see how much you could do. Call it morbid curiosity. Call it planting seeds. Call it boredom. Or call it chaotic wish fulfilment for all I care. Goodbye, child. Prove me wrong. I hope the Lorekeeper binds our paths again."

He vanished amongst the trees.

Elliot waited until he was gone, then she started crying. The rain was heavier now. She dragged herself inside her tower.

She leaned against the wall, facing the door that she had left open. But there were no open doors for her.

The eleventh bell rung.

Everything was not yet lost. She knew the Runes. What of it if she hadn't learned Conception? It was nothing but the power of her mind. Her will. And she was certain she had that.

So, she focused.

She imagined her black hair, stripped away of its colour, revealing the new, rebirthed hair. She imagined it's bleached lack of colour, full of life and ready to be dyed. She imagined her new life with the hair, the new doors that it would open. She could see it in her mind, the way forward, the way out.

She crawled outside and picked a not too wet patch of mud. She drew the first Rune and said its name aloud. She focused on her hair. The soaked black mass that fell over her face. Then she drew the second Rune and said its name. She imagined the blackness of her

hair peeling away. She drew the third and final Rune, saying its name. She imagined the beautiful blonde being uncovered.

Then her head began to heat up. The rain fell upon her, and steam rose as it hit her. Was it working?

It started to hurt. Perhaps that was the desired effect, but Elliot didn't know. She endured the pain a moment longer. Maybe it was supposed to hurt a little. Nothing was easy.

She grabbed a strand of her hair, its blackness still present. The strand fell, having been barely touched.

She couldn't take the pain any longer.

Elliot screamed, rubbing her scalp, trying to soothe the burning sensation. She let the rain fall on her as the burning feeling subsided. She ran inside the tower, gasping for breath. There was an overwhelming feeling of panic. Every time she swiped her hand on her head, a strand of black hair fell.

She felt small bumps in the bald patches, where the skin had curled up, like some piece of dried meat. She grabbed her hair and pulled, taking out several strands. She did it again and again, until no more hair came out.

The pain subsided.

Crying, she ran her hands on her head. There were many bald patches, where the hair had been completely ripped. Around her, the black hair, still wet from the rain, mixed with the mud.

She couldn't move. She could barely breathe. She thought she had lost everything.

It took her several hours before she could finally find the strength to get up and walk.

She walked up the stairs, hoping that the air up there would give her some hope.

Everything was gone. Everything she wanted.

One step at a time.

The seven days were done. Her invitation no longer valid.

The gold coins were gone. Her father would eventually find out and there would be consequences.

One floor at a time.

Her friend would be a Vernal by now, living in the Academy, basically at the fringe of society. Gone.

Argen, whose only flaw had been to try and help her when she was too proud to accept. She had made him gone. Gone.

She reached the balcony on the tenth floor. The top of the tower. Sometimes, the top of the world. Elliot's world, at least.

She stood in her usual spot, overlooking the tall mountains of the Charmed Slopes. Behind her, the tower cast a long shadow, as the morning sun rose from the Mirrored Ocean, bringing forth a new sun. For many, a new beginning.

As she saw the fresh light of a new day, she realized, in terror, that she was late.

Just one more thing for her to lose.

She stepped towards the parapet and looked down.

One step at a time, right?

Now tearless, she saw how everything could be fine.

One step.

END OF PART I

Thank you for reading

You have reached the end of this preview.
The story continues in an unfinished manuscript.
Discover Vrania in the published novels.

Tales of a Paradigm

Tales of a Lich

Tales of a Heretic

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